



## **BILKENT UNIVERSITY**

**2018-2019 Academic Year**

**Fall Semester**

**Hist 413-1 Byzantine History I 324-1025**

**Instructor: Luca Zavagno**

**NIKA REVOLT**

**RESEARCH PAPER**

**Taha KILIÇ-21400580**

The time of Justinian is a historical milestone in transition from antiquity to middle Ages. From Justinian's personality to the important events that occurred in his time, it is exciting to conduct a research. He played a different role in Byzantine Empire and relationship with Theodora, who is wife of Justinian has effect a lot on his ruling. Nika Revolt is one of the significant event that took place in 532. It cause dramatic change in Empire's structure economically, socially and politically. In this paper, event of Nika revolt, reasons and result of it will be analysed.

Justinian I was also known as Justinian the Great and also Saint Justinian the Great. He was the Eastern Roman Emperor from 527 to 565. Thanks to his effort to restore the empire, he was also named as 'Last Roman'. He played major role on taking back the loss territories. Justinian was also known by his judicial reforms. He aimed to complete revision of all Roman Law. However, what blocks and influence very negatively to his reforms was Nika Revolt. Discontent and confusion had dominate the atmosphere of the city, which is Constantinople. With the help of some elites and senators to rebels, rebellion gained more power and aim of rebellion went wrong way.

To begin with, "Nika," which means "victory" in Greek, urban rioters shouted in the Hippodrome which. Facility was about 400 metres long and 200 hundred metres wide. It is even bigger than some modern stadium. As it is known that there are some discontent behind the every riots. There were demands and complaints about the Emperor who was Justinian. At that time, Hippodrome was the place where people rise up their voice towards the emperor. Hippodrome may be related to today's social media to some extent. People come together and communicate with each other directly. Therefore, Hippodrome was playing a major role in both political and social structure of Byzantine Empire. Any changing in structure of empire or important event were discussed and evaluated in Hippodrome between people. These people were united under groups which were Greens, Blues, Reds and the Whites. Greens and Blues were more powerful than the other two groups. They were representative specific groups in the empire and they were in competition. Chariot racing was the game which competition was felt mostly. They paints horses and the chariots according to their team's colour. In the times of Justinian's reign, Blues and Greens were more popular in these races. For several decades, emperor usually choose one of those groups. In that way, emperial aim to control the relationship between them and block to way of uniting against himself. While he was about to took throne, it was believed that he was supporter of Blues but now, because he wanted to remain above partisan politics even of the most superficial kind, he did not throw his support behind any charioteer. This would prove to be a serious mistake. Justinian. He was not yet emperor, and he seems to have thought there was some political gain in identifying himself with the Blues, for he was a Blue and Theodora had been a Blue since her days in the theater. If Blue gang members got in trouble with the law, they knew they had a friend in Justinian, and that made them all the bolder. (Evans) It shows how risky to support one of those team for emperor. It may have negative influence on both ruling and justice system.

Emperor was aware of the competition and tries to breed bad blood between them. In this way, ruling would become easy for every emperor. Justinian was also doing the same thing to these groups. However his decisions in some particular area were not welcomed by these

groups and it lead the cooperation between these rivalry groups towards the emperor. Sparks of riot was started to feel by the rulers. In 532, what ignited the insurrection was a protest in the Hippodrome by the Blue and Green demes, but it was fueled by resistance to Justinian's reforms that challenged the old social order of Constantinople, and also by the aversion that the old ruling classes felt for Justinian, and even more for his empress, the former actress Theodora. (Evans)

One of discontent was the setting the new standards for protocol. Theodora and Justinian had decided that Senators who came to the emperor, is expected to kiss Theodora and Justinian's shoes before they prostrate themselves in front of the Emperor. Such new protocol was not welcomed by the Senators and people. It was considered as insult to tradition. The ceremony must have wounded the pride of the old ruling classes of the empire, for in earlier reigns, senators were not required to prostrate themselves before the emperor and no formal greetings were given to the empress. (Evans) In that way, Theodora and Justinian may aimed to show off and exalt themselves but it was one of reason which will cause catastrophic devastation in the empire. There were linkage between senators and these groups. Discontent of Senators were felt by these groups and senators had power to influence them. It increased the personal dislike for Justinian and Theodora. Another discontent which triggers the Nika revolt is heavily taxes policy. Increasing taxes rate, which was for financing the guarding the empire and funding expensive military campaign had increased the anger. Including the fact that among the unemployed in Constantinople there was a growing number of persons from the provinces who had been driven from their homes by the harsh methods of the imperial tax collectors on the staff of John the Cappadocian, the praetorian prefect. (Evans) The last most known reason behind riot was the execution of the prisoners. Execution took also place in hippodrome. It may be considered as Emperor's way of showing his power to people. After every prisoners were executed, two of them remained alive because of the breaking the rope. . Twice the rope broke and the prisoners fell to the ground, still alive. It created different atmosphere in the hippodrome and people started to demand release of these men. These alive prisoners were the member of Greens and Blues. It was considered as sing of God. After three days, traditional race was hold in the hippodrome. Blues and Greens were screaming together and demanding mercy from Emperor for their members. The slogan of "Long live the merciful Greens and Blues!" was shouted loudly. Such togetherness creates cooperation and rival two groups started to act together which is normally hard to do. Emperor Justinian was quiet because he did not think that it was something serious and his response was negative and then the riot had begun However, it turns out something very bad for Emperor Justinian. Execution of their friends was just starter of spark. Anger was against mostly ministers of Justinian namely the city prefect Eudaimon, the quaestor Tribonian, and the praetorian prefect John the Cappadocian. They were unpopular among the people and they were unwanted.

In order to appease the crowd, Justinian had promised to accede the demand of people by holding bible at his hand in the Hippodrome. Justinian discharged and removed these ministers from the office. However, his attempt to appease the crowd was unsuccessful. These attempts were not enough to satisfy the crowd's desire. After the getting support of some senators who don't like the new policy of Justinian and himself, it turns out the desire of Justinian's resign which Theodora and Justinian don't want it. The city of Constantinople was exposed huge burning because of the riot. Half of the city was almost under fire which was done by rebels. Mass destruction of buildings and chaos was everywhere in the city. Mobs broke into the prison and free the all inmates. All guards were also killed. After the freeing inmates, crowd had set fire the Praetorian. Next, angry crowd people proceeded the main street of Constantinople towards the imperial palace. While they were proceeding, they set

fire every building. These fires had destroyed completely the old version of Hagia Sophia. Senators and other elites had tried to direct the angry crowd for their own advantage. Even Hypatius began to think himself as new emperor when situation were going really bad for Justinian. Justinian's advisers suggested him to run away immediately but his wife Theodora did not accept it. Theodora was playing important role on decision making. It can be said that she has really huge influence on Justinian. The famous speech of Theodora was persuasive to the Justinian and his a few support. She said that she would live by the old maxim that the imperial purple made a good burial shroud. It impress the Justinian and it changed the plan. Plan was not about escaping anymore but it was about defence and quelling the rebellion. With the help of Narses, Justinian made a plan of massacre. Narses's loyalty was key factor in quelling the rebellion.

While hippodrome was full of rebels, soldiers of Justinian has entered to hippodrome from different three gates and the massacre has started. It was estimated that approximately between 30.00 and 40.000 people were killed by the Justinian. It was one of biggest bloody event in the history of Byzantine. The birthplace of riot was now its deathbed. Two important ringleaders, who are Hypatios and Pompeios, were sentenced by death penalty. Justinian did not want actually kill them and his attitude towards them was merciful but his wife Theodora insisted that they should be killed. The other ringleader senators were exiled and all their property were taken by the Empire. After a while, Justinian let them come back to country.

Consequences of this event has different parts. Firstly, it can be said that Nika revolt has changed the personality of Justinian. Justinian were affected very emotionally by revolt. He became a person who is more merciful. From the massacre day, Justinian did not sentence or punish anybody for execution throughout the 30 years of his ruling and also he did not investigate ringleaders who were not in the Hippodrome at the time of massacre. Also he did not punish their family because of the attending the rebellion. As it is known that according to the rule of Roman, if you attend to any rebellion, both yourself and your family will be punished by the Emperor. It shows that Justinian became more merciful person when compared to past. He was so regretful that he built the Hagia Sophia in order to be forgiven. Therefore, Hagia Sophia was considered as symbol of amnesty for Justinian. Justinian began ambitious projects of restoration. First came the construction of the enormous cathedral of Hagia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) near the palace in Constantinople. Replacing an earlier church destroyed in the Nika revolt, Hagia Sophia embodied the spirit of Christian renovation that Justinian wished to be characteristic of his reign. The emperor also pursued an extensive building program throughout his realm, making his piety and solicitude for his subjects visible to all.

As it was mentioned previously that political structure of Byzantine was affected by the Nika revolt. Constantinopolitan senators appear to have been heavily involved. It is important to appreciate the nature of these changes, for they reflected a deliberate attempt by Justinian to exert a greater degree of authority over the leading elements in society. He carefully redefined the role and establishment of the senate, for example: senators henceforth played an active part in legal appeals to the imperial court, sitting together with the consistorium. Another most important changing in the political structure of Byzantine is the policy of enter-exit control to Constantinople. After the appeasing the riot, Justinian had decided that no one can enter to the city if they don't have something to do. In that way, Justinian want to limit the city and also it is easier to control the city.

However in some case, results of Nika Revolt were much to Justinian's advantage. He was able confiscate some of wealthy estates and also he was back to offices more strongly. He eliminated and removed the officials easily. His victory over the rebels garnered him new respect. There were not any attempt to move against the Justinian and he was ambitious to make his plan such as rebuilding the city, reconquering territory. For instance, Italy was one of his aim to take back and also North Africa and Spain was part of it. His general, Belisarius, quickly conquered the Vandal Kingdom in North Africa. Subsequently, Belisarius, Narses, and other generals conquered the Ostrogothic kingdom, restoring Dalmatia, Sicily, Italy, and Rome. Justinian enjoyed his 33 reign by that way.

To conclude, Nika Revolt had both negative and positive aspects. The negative sides of revolt was that approximately between 30.000 and 35.000 people were killed in the Hippodrome to quell the rebellion. It is most bloody event that city had ever seen it before. City of Constantinople was almost destroyed. Huge amount of fire caused the also huge demolition in the city. These are the mainly negative sides of Nika Revolt. On the other hand, the positive sides of Revolt are that Justinian had chance to get rid of the oppositions. Many of them were killed or sent away from the state. Thanks to this, He puts his plans into the practise easily. Taking back control of some areas were part his plans. Lastly, it is believed that Justinian became more merciful emperor and there were not any execution punishment after Nika Revolt during his reign.

## Bibliography

The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian edited by: Michael Maas  
Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

The Oxford history of Byzantium, Cryil A Mango, Oxford ; New York : Oxford University  
Press, 2002.

THE EMPEROR JUSTINIAN AND THE BYZANTINE EMPIRE, Greenwood Publishing  
Group, 2005 James Allan Evans